Does the Bible Teach that the World Will End? • Gary DeMar

Gary DeMar

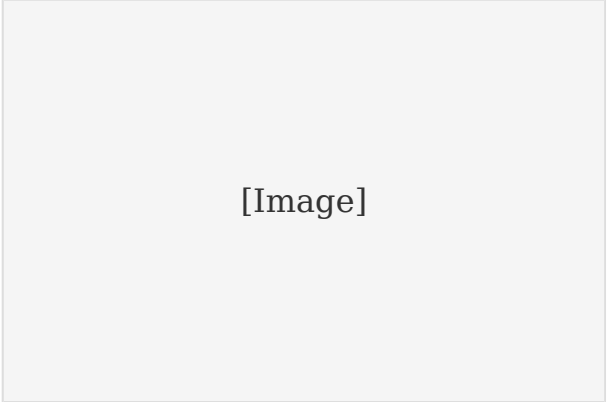
When Christians hear the phrase the “end of the world,” most assume it’s a reference to a great end-time prophetic event like Armageddon, the Second Coming of Christ, or the cataclysmic end of heaven and earth as a prelude to a New Heavens and New Earth. Actually, the phrase “end of the world,” as in the end of the physical world, is not found in the Bible. There is Psalm 19:4, but in context “end of the world” is a geographical description: “Their line has gone out **through** all the earth, and their utterances **to** the end of the world.” The same is true of its use in the New Testament (Acts 13:47; Rom. 10:18).

The “end of the world” appears several times in the King James translation of the Bible. The Greek word *kosmos*, the word we would expect to find for the translation of these “end of the world” passages, is not used. Modern translations render the passages as the “end of the **age**” because the Greek word *aiōn* not *kosmos* is used. The New King James translation remedies the translation error of the original KJV by translating *aiōn* as “age” and not “world” (Matt. 13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20). *Aiōn* refers to a limited historical period, not the physical world (1 Cor. 10:11). *Kosmos* (“foundation of the **world**,” that is, the *physical* world) and *aiōnōn* (“consummation of the **ages**”) are used in Hebrews 9:26, a time when Jesus had been “manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.” It seems odd that the translators of the KJV translated two different Greek words in the same verse as “world.” The New King James corrects the error.

Ephesians 3:21 is often quoted to support the argument that the world will never end. It may teach this idea, but not based on the KJV translation that’s as follows: “Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, **world without end**. Amen.” The Greek word *kosmos* is not found in the passage. Here’s a more literal reading: **“**to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations **age** [αἰῶνος] **to the ages** [αἰώνων]. Amen.”

Jesus’ appearance on earth as “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), not just Jews but the nations (4:42), coincides with the

consummation of the ages, a first-century reality. In fact, the writer to the Hebrews opens his epistle with the claim that he was living in "**these** last days" because of the first coming of Christ in the world (Heb. 1:2). The tabernacle had become incarnate (John 1:14) and personalized (2:13–22) in Jesus Christ. Peter uses similar language when he writes, "For [Jesus] was foreknown before the foundation of the world [*kosmos*] but has appeared **in these last times** for the sake of you" (1 Peter 1:20). Paul tells his Corinthian audience that "the ends of the ages **have come**" (1 Cor. 10:11).



Peter writes from the vantage point of his day that "the end of all things is at hand" (1 Peter. 4:7; cf. 1:20). This can hardly be a declaration that the end of the physical universe was about to take place. "At hand" tells us that whatever this end is, it was near for Peter and his first-century audience. Jay E. Adams offers a helpful commentary on the passage, considering its historical and theological context:

> [First] Peter was written before A.D. 70 (when the destruction of Jerusalem took place)…. The persecution (and martyrdom) that these (largely) Jewish Christians had been experiencing up until now stemmed principally from unconverted Jews (indeed, his readers had found refuge among **Gentiles** as resident aliens)…. [H]e refers to the severe trials that came upon Christians who had fled Palestine under attack from their unconverted fellow Jews. **The end of all things** (that had brought this exile about) was **near.**
>
> In six or seven years from the time of writing, the overthrow of

> Jerusalem, with all its tragic stories, as foretold in the Book of Revelation and in the Olivet Discourse upon which that part is based, would take place. Titus and Vespasian would wipe out the old order once and for all. All those forces that led to the persecution and exile of these Christians in Asia Minor—the temple ceremonies (outdated by Christ's death), Pharisaism (with its distortion of O.T. law into a system of works-righteousness) and the political stance of Palestinian Jewry toward Rome—would be erased. The Roman armies would wipe Jewish opposition from the face of the land. Those who survived the holocaust of A.D. 70 would themselves be dispersed around the Mediterranean world. "So," says Peter, "hold on; the end is near." The full **end** of the O.T. order (already made defunct by the cross and the empty tomb) was about to occur. ((Jay E. Adams, *Trust and Obey: A Practical Commentary on First Peter* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 129–130.))

Adam Clarke (1762–1832) writes the following in his commentary on 1 Peter 4:7: "Peter says, *The end of all things is at hand*; and this he spoke when God had determined to destroy the Jewish people and their polity by one of the most signal judgments that ever fell upon any nation or people. In a very few years after St. Peter wrote this epistle, even taking it at the lowest computation, viz., A. D. 60 or 61, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. To this destruction, which was literally then at hand, the apostle alludes when he says, *The end of all things is at hand*; the end of the temple, the end of the Levitical priesthood, the end of the whole Jewish economy, was then at hand." ((*Clarke's Commentary on The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, 2 vols. (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1810), 2:864.))

The end of the age was the real end of the world, the world of old covenant Judaism, and the inauguration of a new era where God no longer speaks in types and shadows but "in His Son" (Heb. 1:2). There was such a dramatic transference from one age to the next that Peter described it as "the end of all things."

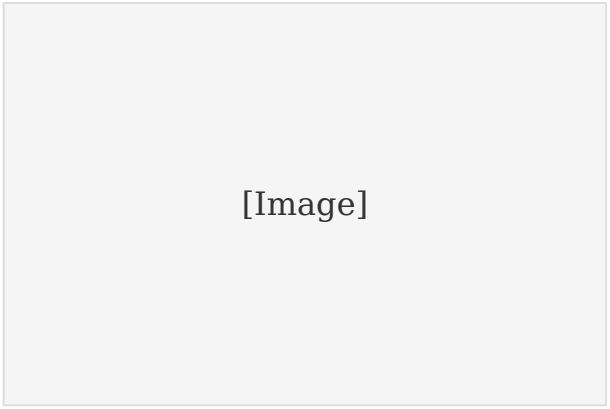
> The use of this end-time language is "typical Jewish imagery for events within the present order that are felt and perceived as 'cosmic' or, as we should say, as 'earth-shattering'. More particularly, they are regular Jewish imagery for events *that bring the story of Israel to its appointed*

> *climax*. The days of Jerusalem's destruction would be looked upon as days of cosmic catastrophe. The known world would go into convulsions: power struggles and *coups d'état* would be the order of the day; the *pax Romana*, the presupposition of 'civilized' life throughout the then Mediterranean world, would collapse into chaos. In the midst of that chaos Jerusalem would fall." ((N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996),362.))

Jerusalem was the redemptive center of the then known world: "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the **center of the nations**, with lands around her'" (Ezek. 5:5). The Jews lived "at the **center of the world**" (38:12). To be far from Jerusalem was to be at "the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). For a Jew, Jerusalem was the center of life (2:5–11). Medieval maps show Jerusalem to be the geographical center of the world because it was the center of redemptive history. Isaiah predicted that the nations would look "to the house of the God of Jacob" for redemption and instruction:

> In the last days, the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains and will be raised above the hills; and all nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways, and that we may walk in His paths" (Isa. 2:2–3).

The nations did look to the "house of Jacob" for their redemption. Paul writes that the gospel "has been made known **to all the nations**, leading to obedience of faith" (Rom. 16:26). The "mystery of godliness" had been "proclaimed **among the nations**, believed on **in the world**" (1 Tim. 3:16).



The Early Church and the End of the World

Shows that some of the earliest writers, most likely writing before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, were referring to the judgment coming of Jesus, an event that the gospel writers tell us was to take place before that first-century generation passed away (Matt. 24:34)

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Christians writing less than 100 years after the destruction of Jerusalem and the dismantling of the temple understood that Isaiah 2 was looking forward to the ministry of the gospel in the world among the nations. Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic words when He said, "Come to Me" (Matt. 11:28). Consider the brief commentary of Justin the Martyr (*c.* 100–165):

> And when the Spirit of prophecy speaks as predicting things that are to come to pass, He speaks in this way: "For the law will go forth from Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations and will render decisions for many peoples; and they will hammer their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never will they learn war" [Isa. 2:3–4]. And that it did so come to pass, we can convince you. For from Jerusalem there went out into the world, men, twelve in number, and these illiterate, of no ability in speaking: but by the power of God they proclaimed to every race of men that they were sent by Christ to teach to all the word of God; and we who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our

> enemies, but also, that we might not lie or deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ. ((Justin Martyr, "The First Apology of Justin," Chapter XXXIX: Direct Predictions by the Spirit, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:175–176.))

Irenaeus (*c*. 130–200), another second-century Christian writer, taught that Isaiah 2 was fulfilled at the time of "the Lord's advent," that is, the first coming of Jesus. You will notice that he believed that the message of "the new covenant" had a worldwide impact before Jerusalem's fall:

> If any one, however, advocating the cause of the Jews, does maintain that this new covenant consisted in the rearing of that temple which was built under Zerubbabel after the emigration to Babylon, and in the departure of the people from thence after the lapse of seventy years, let him know that the temple constructed of stones was indeed then rebuilt (for as yet that law was observed which had been made upon tables of stone), yet no new covenant was given, but they used the Mosaic law until the coming of the Lord; but from the Lord's advent, the new covenant which brings back peace, and the law which gives life, has gone forth over the whole earth, as the prophets said: "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem; and He shall rebuke many people; and they shall break down their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks, and they shall no longer learn to fight." ((Irenaeus, "Proof Against the Marcionites, that the Prophets Referred in All Their Predictions to Our Christ," *Against Heresies*," Book IV, Chapter 34.))

Tertullian (160–225) makes a similar application when he argues that it is "among *us*, who have been called out of the nations,—'and they shall join to beat their glaives into ploughs, and their lances into sickles; and nations shall not take up glaive against nation, and they shall no more learn to fight.' Who else, therefore, are understood but *we*, who, fully taught by the new law, observe these practices,—the old law being obliterated, the coming of whose abolition the action itself demonstrates?" ((Tertullian, "Of Circumcision and the Supercession of the Old Law," *An Answer to the Jews*, Chapter III.))

With the advent of Jesus and the ministry of the gospel to the nations, earthly Jerusalem would no longer be the geographical center of the world. The world had come into view, so much so that Paul could write that the gospel had been "proclaimed in all creation under heaven" (Col. 1:23; cf. 1:6; Rom. 1:8; 10:18; 1 Tim. 3:16d). The temple and the city of Jerusalem were shadows of better things to come. The tabernacle was a "copy and shadow of heavenly things … according to the pattern which was shown [to Moses] on the mountain" (Heb. 8:5). Jesus is the "true tabernacle" (8:2). The "new covenant . . . made the first [covenant] obsolete" (8:13). The writer to the Hebrews describes it this way: "But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear" (8:13). The word translated as "ready" is actually the Greek word *engus*, "near." James C. DeYoung writes:

> The total impression gained from the accumulation of evidence from Jesus' teaching and prophecy concerning the rejection and doom of Jerusalem, as well as from the teaching of Galatians and Hebrews is that the significance of Jerusalem in the history of redemption had come to an end with the death of Jesus. Thus, the antithesis between the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem is based upon the cross of Christ. Jerusalem's rejection and crucifixion of her Messiah, whether viewed retrospectively by the Apostles, or prospectively by Jesus himself, formed the basis for the pessimistic view of the future of the city. Thus the investigation of the relevant passages from the Gospels has shown that the Christian break with Jerusalem came long before her destruction in A.D. 70. ((James Calvin DeYoung, *Jerusalem in the New Testament: The Significance of the City in the History of Redemption and in Eschatology* (Kampen, Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1960), 109–110.))

Jesus is the center of redemptive history. He far surpasses anything the temple of stone and the sacrificial system of bloody animals were thought to be. "We have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh" (10:19–20).

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